



Safeguarding subjects?

A reflexive appraisal of researcher accountability in qualitative interviews

Caroline Gatrell

*Department of Management Learning and Leadership,
Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK*

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the long-term effects of qualitative interviews on respondents. The paper offers a reflexive account of the author's research practices with regard to "safeguarding" research participants and researcher accountability.

Design/methodology/approach – In 1999-2002, 20 women and 18 men who are in dual earner marriages/partnerships were interviewed separately. The study was entitled "Hard Labour 1". In this paper, It is explained how, in 2007, 17 "Hard Labour 1" participants were contacted for a follow-up study entitled "Hard Labour Revisited". They were asked, via telephone and e-mail, whether (and if so, how) they perceived themselves to have been affected by their interview for "Hard Labour 1".

Findings – Some respondents are interviewed at a time of personal anxiety. This group perceived their interview as having been influential because it made them reflect deeply on their situation, bringing their thoughts to bear when they conducted subsequent negotiations with partners. However, participants do not see this as a reason to avoid qualitative research. They describe themselves as agentic beings who felt ownership of their involvement in "Hard Labour 1". Their approach make to reflect upon the author's interpretation of "safeguarding" which is now regarded as a concept which may be co-constructed between researcher and participants.

Originality/value – The paper explores "safeguarding" in relation to the long-term effects of qualitative research interviews. It is suggest that undertaking a reflexive reappraisal of research practices is important because analyses of past projects may (as in the author's case) result in a "shift" in understanding of research concepts from both an empirical and a theoretical perspective.

Keywords Interviews, Qualitative methods, Qualitative research, Marriage, Role conflict

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reflect critically upon my own research practices, and to make observations about the accountability of qualitative researchers as regards the "safeguarding" of participants. Specifically, I investigate whether, six years after giving qualitative interviews about work-life balance, the employed professional couples involved in my study perceived themselves to have been affected by the research. I seek to unpack the notion of what it means to "protect" interviewees through problematizing the category "safeguarding" and reflecting upon the agency of participants within a research project.

The potential effect of qualitative research interviews on respondents is a priority among scholars of research methods (Finch, 1993; Haynes, 2006; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Reinharz, 1992). It has been recognized (Haynes, 2006) that some research participants associate qualitative interviews with catharsis: interviews are seen as an "opportunity to articulate" feelings and anxieties, to an apparently non-judgemental listener (Haynes, 2006, p. 210). However, the potentially exploitative



nature of research interviews, particularly those that require participants to draw upon personal issues, remains a serious concern. Smart and Neale (1999) were, for example, concerned not to worsen relations between the divorced couples they interviewed in their study. Qualitative researchers are exhorted to prioritise the interests of the researched above the desire to collect data and achieve publications (Finch, 1993; Skeggs, 1995). Ethical guidelines provided by “official” bodies such as the British Sociological Association and the British Psychological Association iterate the need to “safeguard” respondents from potentially harmful effects of qualitative research interviews (British Sociological Association, 2002; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Scholars are thus advised to design research that “ensure[s] that the physical, social and psychological well-being of research participants is not adversely affected” (British Sociological Association, 2002, p. 2). However, it is recognized that “well-being” and safeguarding are difficult either to clarify or to guarantee (Finch, 1993; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000), this implying that “safeguarding” as a concept is in itself problematic. Is it possible to define “safeguarding” as a universal category which may be applied uniformly to all research projects, or should the notion of safety be fluid, situational and co-constructed between the researcher and the researched?

Haynes (2006) underlines the need to consider the safety of both researchers and participants. In the context of well-being, she has identified the importance of researcher reflexivity. Haynes relates the welfare of those who conduct research interviews, and of their respondents, to an understanding of how the two parties “affect each other mutually and continually in the research process” (Haynes, 2006, 2008). She also observes how, despite scholarly concerns with the principle of researcher accountability: “the effects and outcomes of actually doing (qualitative interviews) are rarely addressed” (Haynes, 2006, p. 204). In relation to Haynes’s observation, I suggest that retrospective studies on qualitative interviews, in which researchers return to participants some time after projects have ended, in order to examine the effects on respondents of having been interviewed, are even rarer. I begin, here, to address this gap through a reflexive investigation, in which I re-visit a past project in order to explore whether participants believed that my desired objective of “safeguarding” their interests was achieved in practice.

The context and aims of the study

Cassell and Symon (2006, p. 6) encourage qualitative researchers to be reflexive through “engage(ing) in a critical appraisal of their own research practices”. Hertz (1997, p. viii) defines reflexivity as “intensive scrutiny of “what I know” and “how I know it” [...] “to provide insight on the working life of the social world and insight on how that knowledge came into existence”. In accordance with Hertz’s (1997) idea that reflexive researchers should scrutinize “what they know” in terms of their own practice, I conducted a study in 2007, entitled “Hard Labour (HL) revisited”, among a group of research participants whom I had interviewed between 1999 and 2002 for a project on work-life balance: “Hard Labour 1”. My purpose in returning to the “Hard Labour 1” respondents was to unpack the notion of “safeguarding” by investigating whether interviewees’ well-being had been compromised through taking part in my study. As I explain below, this resulted in a “shift in my understanding of data and its collection” (Hertz, 1997, p. vii). I moved from regarding “safeguarding” as a definable (and arguably realist) category which could be imposed upon research subjects, to viewing safeguarding as a more fluid concept, which might be co-constructed between researcher and participants.

In order to provide background and context for what follows, this paper initially gives a short overview of the literature on the well-being of research respondents. I then describe, in detail, my original methodological considerations relating to “Hard Labour 1”, researcher accountability and the potential problems of interviewing, separately, married couples. I outline, in this context, my original interpretation of “safeguarding”. I move on to describe the present study, “HL Revisited” in which I examine whether Hard Labour 1 participants perceived themselves to have been affected by the experience of being interviewed. I offer a reflexive account of the implications of my findings in relation not only to researcher accountability, but also in relation to the potential accountability of the researched.

The interests of the researcher versus the interests of research participants

The idea of researcher accountability for the “safeguarding” of respondents is (as noted above) a central theme in theoretical discussions about qualitative interviewing. Since the 1980s, the need to balance what Ramazangolu and Holland (2002, p. 157) describe as the “self interest” of the researcher, with responsibility towards research participants, has been foregrounded. This is despite the acknowledged “diversity in philosophical assumptions that underlie qualitative research” (Cassell and Symon, 2006, p. 7). Thus, for example, concern about the well-being of the researched has been pivotal to scholars undertaking research from perspectives described as “feminist”, a feminist research position requiring respondents to be treated as participants rather than subjects, but concurrently stipulating researcher responsibility for “protecting” interviewees (Code, 1991; Finch, 1993; Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Oakley, 1981; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Stanley and Wise, 1993). Similarly health, sociological and psychosocial researchers place an equivalent emphasis on the accountability of the researcher regarding the well-being of the researched (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p. 83). On the basis of these concerns, Silverman (2000), Rubin and Rubin (1995), Holloway and Wheeler (1996), Letherby (2003) and Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2008) all underline the requirement for researchers to address what Hollway and Jefferson (2000, p. 90) describe as the: “potential of research for exploiting participants”.

The potentially exploitative nature of qualitative research interviews is a particular focus of research such as my own in which work-life balance and marriage/co-habitation are the subject (Brannen and Moss, 1991; Finch, 1993). This is because, when describing critical incidents within marriage and parenting, respondents may be required to draw upon experiences in which deep emotion is invested (Finch, 1993; Haynes, 2006; Smart and Neale, 1999). Conventionally, qualitative researchers engaging in the study of personal relationships (including myself) have taken particular trouble over how to safeguard participants (Gatrell, 2006). This focus on the potential effect of giving qualitative interviews about personal relationships means that published research on family practices often includes detailed descriptions of methodological deliberations about safeguarding (Gatrell, 2006; Haynes, 2006; Ribbens, 1994; Smart and Neale, 1999). Below, I describe the study “HL Revisited”, which enabled me to reflexively examine my own research practice in relation both to the understanding of safeguarding, and the idea of researcher accountability.

Hard Labour 1: “safeguards” and “one off” interviews

In order to set in context the discussions about researcher accountability and “HL Revisited”, I first describe my attempts to safeguard the interests of participants in the original (1999–2002) project, “Hard Labour 1” (Gatrell, 2005). The background for “Hard Labour 1” was the increasing trend for managerially employed, married/co-habiting UK mothers of pre-school children to maintain continuous employment after childbirth (Pullinger and Summerfield, 1998). “Hard Labour 1” was based on a sample of in-depth interviews (all undertaken by me) and conducted separately with 20 mothers and 18 fathers. The work of Brannen and Collard (1982) and Valentine (1999) was drawn upon in relation to the sensitivities and difficulties of interviewing partners separately. Inclusion criteria for participation were determined by how far mothers in the qualitative sample matched the picture provided by the demographic trends outlined in the Labour Force Survey for 1998 (Thair and Risdon, 1999). All were qualified minimally to degree level and all were employed in professional and/or managerial roles.

Although interviewing both women and men, I explained to each participant that I was undertaking my research from a feminist “position” as described by Code (1991). This was because I wished to make policy recommendations to improve work-life balance and labour market conditions specifically for mothers in management. It was also because I had been strongly influenced by the feminist research approach recommended by Oakley (1981), Reinharz (1992) and Finch (1993) in which the responsibility of the researcher to safeguard her participants was seen as paramount. Finch (1993) is well known for her emphasis on the need to “protect” respondents from unintended, negative side effects as a result of having taken part in research interviews, and I sought to follow her advice.

My desire to safeguard participants led me to forego a longitudinal element within my research design, which I believed would have enriched the study. Thus, instead of undertaking repeat interviews over time, I interviewed each person on a single occasion only. The decision to conduct only one interview with each respondent was due to my fear that repeat interviews could have a detrimental impact on participants’ marital relationships. As a lone researcher, having interviewed both partners, I feared that holding both “sides” of a story might have the potential to cause difficulties within the relationship, were I to return for further interviews. As King (1996, p. 177) points out, even in the most organized of interviews, “slip-ups” could occur. I feared that any slip-up that occurred during repeat interviews could have been damaging to participants’ marriages/partnerships. I was also worried that there could be a risk of repeat interviews blurring the boundaries between a research interview (which these were) and counselling interviews (which these were definitely not intended to be). King (1996, p. 182), when considering repeat interviews, noted:

I had felt [concern] that by creating a feedback loop and reflecting back [...] [to the interviewee], I might be construed as potentially offering some level of intervention, whereas my aim had been to enhance my comprehension of the narrative.

At the time, based on the observations of King (1996), I felt justified in my lone decision not to do repeat interviews. Brannen and Collard (1982), had made a similar choice, undertaking single interviews only (conducting interviews separately) with husbands and wives in their study, “Marriages in trouble”. There appeared to be similarities

between the experiences of Brannen *et al.* as interviewers, and my own experience. For this reason, I quote their description of the interviews at some length:

The problem concerning our interviews was the reverse of that which is usually described in the literature, where the interviewer is instructed in the importance of gaining rapport on the assumption that significant barriers to disclosure exist. Our respondents were people in crisis and any questions we asked them almost inevitably provoked very painful feelings [...] they were only too ready to talk to someone who was uninvolved and not unsympathetic. Thus, our strategies as interviewers served to trigger respondents' responses, rather than to overcome barriers to communication [...] (Brannen and Collard, 1982, p. 25-6).

Although in "Hard Labour 1", the state of the couples' relationships was unknown at the start of the interview, participants' responses were similar to those quoted above. The notion of a "one off" interview did not appear inhibiting for participants. Conversely, it seemed to provide a "freedom" for individuals to be, apparently, remarkably frank about personal experiences and feelings. Reflecting on their own experiences, Brannen and Collard (1982, p. 26) state how they:

[...] wish to emphasise the necessity for safeguards, since in undertaking research interviews, people reveal and render themselves vulnerable. It is therefore crucial that researchers should handle the respondents [...] with respect and integrity.

At the time, therefore, I concluded that undertaking repeat interviews among the Hard Labour 1 group (at least on the topic of work-life balance) was inappropriate because this could be problematic for participants. This was despite my personal desire, as a self-interested researcher, to include a longitudinal element within "Hard Labour 1". In the context of what follows, however, it is important to acknowledge that, although I was well versed in the literature, I did not consult research participants about what to do regarding the possibility of repeat interviews. My decisions about what was "safe" for participants were taken alone and based upon the scholarly views of other writers. This was despite the knowledge that the group involved were well-qualified and articulate, often with strong opinions of their own. Even though I undertook a pilot study for Hard Labour 1, it did not occur to me to share with respondents the responsibility for making choices about their own well-being, in the context of whether to undertake repeat interviews. In 1999, I did not question how far my professionally employed participants might (or might not) consider themselves as "vulnerable" and in need of "safeguarding".

Because I did not ask the question, I cannot be sure whether respondents would have thought it appropriate to give repeat interviews. I did invite participants to provide general feedback at the end of each interview and, while acknowledging that it had been painful to recollect certain experiences, interviewees welcomed the chance to talk about their feelings (as in Haynes's, 2006 study). However, I had no sense as to whether the interviews had affected the behaviour or attitudes of participants in the longer term, or whether my attempts to "safeguard" respondents had been effective. This seemed an important omission – given the extent of my own concerns, and those of others (Finch, 1993) about researcher accountability. In 2007, therefore, I set about the follow-up study, "HL Revisited", in which I returned to half of the "Hard Labour 1" participants, so as to find out whether they considered themselves to have been affected by their interview.

Research design for “Hard Labour Revisited”

As noted above, “Hard Labour 1” took place between 1999 and 2002 (Gatrell, 2005). I aimed to contact half the original sample to seek feedback on the effect being interviewed for “Hard Labour 1”. I planned that if anyone reported that the original interview had affected them negatively, I would extend the sample. However, if no negative effects were suggested, I proposed to assume I had achieved a level of “saturation” among participants (Mason, 2002). I intended, then, to reflexively analyse participants’ views about safeguarding and to interpret these findings in relation to researcher accountability. I thus arranged the names of men and women alphabetically and attempted to contact every other respondent on the list. I began with 19 names in all, and failed to contact two, meaning that my eventual sample was 17.

Initially, I found that six respondents were contactable via their original phone numbers and, given the professional status of most participants, I was able to find a further 11 through “Google”. Prior to contacting all 17, I spoke to two respondents, to gauge how to approach this follow-up research. I had imagined conducting the research for “HL Revisited” as a face-to-face interview. However, the first participant, whom I contacted by phone (Vivienne), had little recollection of her original interview. She suggested that, for this reason, she would find a face-to-face interview embarrassing and a “waste of both our time”. The second participant, whom I met for a coffee (Julie), remembered the interview clearly, but also had reservations about the idea of a face-to-face discussion. In Julie’s case, the reservations centred on the idea that research evaluation of this nature would be better conducted using methods that allow personal distancing:

It was fine doing the first one because it was of interest to me, but this is more for you and the university, so I don’t think it’s maybe fair to ask it of people. Also, if I did have something to say which is critical I would not say so [to your face], though I might do so on the phone or e-mail.

As a result of the discussions with Julie and Vivienne, I offered people the choice of responding by phone or over e-mail. Three participants preferred a phone conversation, which I taped and transcribed. Of this group, one person also filled in a list of research feedback questions, which I sent via e-mail. Of the remaining 15, two said they would get back to me (but did not) and 11 offered to answer questions over e-mail. In the event, nine respondents returned the e-mailed research feedback questions as detailed shown in Table I.

I compiled a list of research feedback questions (below) for use both over the phone and on e-mail. The e-mailed questions were preceded by an electronic letter explaining why I was doing the research. It was noted that e-mails would come directly to my

Number of participants (17 individuals, 18 responses)	Type of response
9	E-mail
3 ^a	Phone
6	No response

Note: ^aOne respondent answered first by e-mail and then also requested a phone interview

Table I.
Numbers of
participants/response
type

computer terminal and was further stated that data would be anonymized in any subsequent publications. The research feedback questions were as follows:

- Thinking back to your interview, can you think of anything which occurred subsequently, which you feel was linked to the interview, and which was positive/helpful?
- Thinking back to your interview, can you think of anything which occurred subsequently, which you feel was linked to the interview, and which was negative/unhelpful?
- Do you think that the experience of being interviewed changed any aspect of your own behaviour (this could be in relation to home, work or both)?
- Do you think that the experience of being interviewed changed any aspect of your partner's behaviour (this could be in relation to home, work or both)?
- Thinking about your own experience, is there any advice you would like to give, or any points you would like to make, which would be helpful to those undertaking qualitative research interviews about relationships?
- Are there any further points you would like to make, either specifically with regard to your own experience of being interviewed, or in general with regard to research interviews?

Findings: hard labour (HL) revisited

Everyone who responded answered all questions, even if they could remember very little about the interview. The research findings fell into two distinct categories. Five of the e-mail respondents remembered the event of being interviewed, but were hazy about the details. This group stated that the original research interviews had had little or no impact on them, or on the attitude and behaviour of their partner. Joe, for example acknowledged that he struggled to remember the experience of being interviewed. Prior to filling in his e-mail survey, he wrote an e-mail "letter", in which he stated:

I would be very happy to fill in your survey, but I must admit I can't remember much about it. Do you still have a copy of the original questions and could you send them to me?

Having received the original set of interview questions, Joe was still vague about what had happened at the interview, and did not recall any effect – negative or otherwise – on his behaviour.

Vivienne's written answers to all the questions on the e-mail survey were all, also, short and indicated that the interview had had no subsequent impact on her life. Vivienne had already acknowledged over the phone, before completing her e-mail survey, that she could remember me being at her house one evening while her children played in the garden, but had forgotten much of the actual experience of being interviewed. She could remember nothing about what she felt, or about what happened after the interview. Vivienne put forward the idea that her limited recall of detail may have coincided with a time when her relationships at home and at work were relatively untroubled, which she offered as a possible explanation for her lack of recall of the interview:

Perhaps, that is a good thing because if there was a negative impact you would remember [the interview], wouldn't you? Maybe you would only remember if things were difficult at the time whereas if [as a couple] you had a united front, it wouldn't cause problems.

Total recall in testing times

In contrast to respondents like Vivienne and Joe, who remembered little about being interviewed, the remaining six people who responded to the follow-up research remembered their interview very clearly, including details such as what they were wearing at the time. For example, Andrea, responding via e-mail, wrote that she could “even remember that I was wearing a horrible brown maternity smock thingy!” Of the group who remembered their interviews well, all noted that the interview had coincided with a time when they were anxious and/or unhappy due either to worries about work, or in the context of their relationship, or both. For example, Andrea, whose recollections of the interview were so acute that she could remember her outfit, was about to give birth to her second child and was extremely anxious about maintaining her position at work. Andrea wrote that the impact of the interview, on her feelings and her behaviour was:

Not negative as such but it did raise some upset and angry feelings about how I was treated after returning to work after my first child, and it did then make me more aware of the underlying anxiety I had about returning to work after the birth of my second child [she was born some two days after the interview!].

Rex, who was considering moving to part-time status at the time of the interview, and was finding this hard to achieve, noted:

I remember this because it was when I was trying to sort out issues with work. I had felt angry about missing so much of [my son's] early years, I had problems which were linked with this and I was dealing with this at that time. So I do remember it.

No, it didn't change my behaviour but I remember feeling very angry.

All of those with a clear memory of their interview considered that the “Hard Labour 1” research – its subject matter and the interview itself – had affected them to the extent that it caused them to reflect profoundly on the issues concerning them. The topics under discussion in “Hard Labour 1” – how men and women managed their commitments to employers, to children and to one another – touched a nerve and made people think in depth about their own situation. This applied perhaps even more acutely when they reflected on marriage/co-habitation than it did in the context of employment. Respondents who were in negotiations regarding relationships and allocation of responsibilities, either with partners, employers, or both, suggested that being interviewed had contributed to serious thought about things from their perspective. Nobody appeared to perceive that the experience of being interviewed had in itself changed their relationships with partners. However, participants suggested that the Hard Labour interview may have been a factor in making more transparent issues that were already in existence with regard to their marriage/partnership.

Gill, for example, (who chose to answer the questions over the phone), felt that her original interview had encouraged her to think more analytically about issues that were associated with unhappiness, but which were on her mind anyway at the time of her interview. Gill's comments indicated that the interview was not responsible for her difficulties, and had not exacerbated these. Nevertheless, Gill's response made me acutely aware that I had interviewed her at a delicate moment when her situation was complex and demanding, as both she and her partner adjusted to the pressures of maintaining senior management roles while parenting their first baby. Gill stated:

He was just vile and I wasn't exactly pleasant to him and I suppose it highlighted that we hated each other. But I really don't think the interview made things worse than they were, they were like that anyway.

Three respondents identified some changes in their behaviour and attitudes which they did attribute, in part, to the experience of having been interviewed. In both these cases – rather like the interviewees in Haynes's (2006) study – respondents suggested that the effect of the research interview had not been detrimental. However, it had offered opportunities for deep reflection about how they managed their work-life balance and their relationships with employers, partners and children. Participants further suggested that the interview for "Hard Labour 1" may have been influential in their conduct of negotiations with partners about allocative responsibilities within households. Marina, for example (another respondent who chose to answer questions over the phone), said:

It helped me get things clearer in my own head, and I thought about things differently. It gave me space to think and when I looked at it all in the wider context, I was less angry. I was also determined to do something about it, so we talked through things sensibly and I don't think he wanted to let the marriage go either, so we wrote down about money and duties and just the fact that we were talking I think helped.

Andrea, the e-mail respondent whose baby was born so soon after her interview noted, similarly:

The interview encouraged me to think carefully about managing domestic arrangements between me and my partner. I can't really say about [his] behaviour, but it certainly made him reflect on the issues.

Rex, who had spent time at home following his illness, and who responded both by phone and via e-mail, suggested that the interview might have caused him to think about taking on greater responsibilities within the home, though he implies that he might have done this anyway:

When I was ill I was at home it made me realize how much [my partner] did. Then when I was back at work I made more effort. The interview maybe made me think about this a bit more.

Discussion: reflections on "safeguarding"

Interviewees who were managing complex personal issues and who remembered their interview in detail were clear that the experience of being interviewed had, minimally, made them think deeply about relationships with partners and employers. There is some indication that interviewees also regarded the experience of having been interviewed as influential when they conducted sensitive negotiations about roles and responsibilities with partners and employers.

It appeared, however, that respondents who were experiencing problems at the time of their "Hard Labour 1" interview did not perceive this as a reason to avoid qualitative research interviews, nor did they seem to regard themselves as "vulnerable". Rather, participants described themselves as agentic beings who took ownership of their decision to take part in Hard Labour 1, especially given that they had been clearly informed about the content and purpose of the research, Andrea's comments indicate the need for boundaries and options to be outlined prior to the interview, this offering

respondents a share in the accountability for “safeguarding” their own well-being. Andrea suggests:

[The interview] will inevitably have some kind of impact and it is therefore useful [for the interviewee] to assess what you are going to do in the light of possible impact before you do it. I also think it is important [for the interviewer] to be clear about the boundaries of the interview and offer the option to the interviewee of not responding/having time to think/opportunity to think about questions first.

Natalie, (along with a further three interviewees who made similar points), challenged firmly the notion that a researcher should be entirely accountable for making decisions, with regard to participant welfare, on behalf of respondents. Natalie made plain her feelings that, as a senior manager in her professional life, she felt more than capable of doing this for herself, so long as she was armed with sufficient information:

As long as it’s properly explained, which I think it was, then it’s up to you [the interviewee] to decide how far it goes, I don’t need nannyng!

Given my concerns about the accountability of the researchers, and the welfare of research participants, (in keeping with most guidelines on “doing qualitative research”), Natalie’s comments about “nannyng” came as something of a surprise to me. The possibility that what I had previously regarded, from my perspective, as “accountable researching” might from a participant perspective, be alternatively defined as “nannyng”, made me reflect on the potential need for me to re-interpret notions of “safeguarding” with regard to respondents. On this basis, I began to reflexively appraise my own research approach from the perspectives described below.

Critical reflections on the research process

The first observation I make with regard to “HL Revisited” as a reflexive study, is that it was of far less interest to potential respondents than it was to me. My ongoing research into the working and family lives of managerially employed parents always attracts participants eager to talk, face-to-face and at length, about issues which are topical and personal to them – even though this requires temporal and emotional investment on their part. However, when asked to take part in research which was perceived to be for “my” benefit, or for the benefit of the university, respondents were less enthusiastic. They were also reluctant to offer face-to-face feedback about my research practices, preferring some personal distance. This obliged me to compromise, relying on the phone and e-mail when my natural inclination is always to interview participants face to face.

The second observation in relation to “HL Revisited”, is that in all five cases where respondents remembered “Hard Labour 1” in vivid detail, their interview coincided with pressures within marital and/or employer relationships. Participants perceived that the interview may have encouraged them to reflect on their situations more deeply than they might have done had the interview not taken place. Furthermore, participants’ reflections were brought to bear when subsequent negotiations about the allocation of household and employment relations responsibilities were conducted. It is possible to speculate, from this finding, that clear recall of previous research interviews may be linked to interviewees’ own state of mind at the time of their interview. This observation is new, and suggests an opportunity for further research.

The finding that some participants did perceive themselves to have been affected, in the longer term, by their qualitative interviews (but that, concurrently, they regarded

themselves as agentic in the research process) brings me to my third observation: that there is a need to reconsider the notion of “safeguarding” within the research process.

Safeguarding participants in qualitative research interviews

It would be easy to conclude that interviews involving married/co-habiting couples are sensitive and that consequently, researchers should take full responsibility for minimizing the risks, to respondents, of participating in qualitative interviews. However, the articulation of some participants of themselves as agentic and capable beings has caused me to reflect upon my own interpretation of the category “safeguarding”: to critically appraise “what I know” (Hertz, 1997, p. viii). It occurs to me that, despite seeking to adopt a feminist position, with respondents positioned as “participants in”, rather than “subjects of”, my research, I have previously regarded myself as personally accountable for the well-being of respondents, rather than entering into participative negotiations to enable the co-construction of what is meant by “safeguarding”. In this context, it is important to note that I remain committed to a duty of care towards interviewees because my research continues to explore highly sensitive issues such as pregnancy, motherhood and relationships with partners and employers. Nevertheless, the comments made so explicitly by Natalie about “nannying” have prompted me to re-think how I approach research among managerially employed parents, given that this group appeared to regard themselves as capable and agentic beings, rather than vulnerable subjects in need of “safeguarding” by me.

Conclusions

It would be inappropriate to generalize from “HL Revisited”, given that my research sample was of highly educated, employed professionals who would not usually be regarded as a vulnerable group (Gatrell, 2006). From a personal perspective, however, a reflexive appraisal of my own research practice indicates the desirability of re-interpreting “safeguarding” by offering my own interviewees (almost always professionally employed individuals) a greater share in decisions about research design in the future. The opening up, here, of “safeguarding”, as a category, highlights a methodological inconsistency in my previous understanding of “feminist” research, which implies an obligation to encourage respondent participation. Arguably, feminist notions of respondent participation are at odds with the imposition of a single definition of “safeguarding” within research design. A researcher who does not share, with members of her sample, accountability for “safeguarding”, could be seen as positioning respondents as vulnerable subjects rather than agentic participants (or, in Natalie’s words, as “nannying”).

Thus, for me, there is likely to be a reallocation in accountability for judgements which, in the past, I have made with more recourse to the literature than to participants themselves. The view that “safeguarding” might be interpreted in different ways, depending on the social capital of research participants, has shifted my understanding of what it means to “safeguard” a research sample. Rather than imagining safeguarding to be a definable category for which the researcher is accountable, I now see the potential for it to be a more fluid concept which, depending on the group researched, could be co-constructed between researcher and participants.

In conclusion, the methodological contribution of this paper is to suggest that undertaking a systematic study of past projects may (as in my case) result in a “shift”

in understanding of research concepts from both empirical and theoretical perspectives. Critically appraising research processes, especially at a later date, may challenge researchers to analyse what is really meant by notions such as, in this case, “safeguarding”, which is acknowledged to be important in research design but which may require unpacking and re-interpreting. The reflexive analysis undertaken here suggests that generic definitions which exclude research participants (thereby positioning them as subjects) could be extended and improved upon by involving respondents in decisions about what is appropriate, or “safe” for them. Greater participant involvement could, in its turn, open up possibilities for different and richer data collection, avenues which might otherwise have been closed by the researcher herself, in a well-intentioned desire to “safeguard” participants’.

References

- Brannen, J. and Collard, J. (1982), *Marriages in Trouble*, Tavistock Publications, London.
- Brannen, J. and Moss, P. (1991), *Managing Mothers: Dual Earner Households After Maternity Leave*, Unwin Hyman, London.
- British Sociological Association (2002), “Statement of ethical practice”, available at: www.britisoc.co.uk (accessed 3 February 2009).
- Cassell, C. and Symon, G. (2006), “Taking qualitative methods in organization and management research seriously”, *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 4-12.
- Code, L. (1991), *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge*, Cornell University Press, New York, NY.
- Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R. and Jackson, P. (2008), *Management Research*, 3rd ed., Sage, London.
- Finch, J. (1993), “It’s great to have someone to talk to: ethics and politics of interviewing women”, in Hammersley, M. (Ed.), *Social Research: Philosophy, Politics and Practice*, Sage, London, pp. 166-80.
- Gatrell, C. (2005), *Hard Labour: The Sociology of Parenthood*, Open University Press, Maidenhead.
- Gatrell, C. (2006), “Interviewing fathers – feminist dilemmas in fieldwork”, *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 237-53.
- Haynes, K. (2006), “A therapeutic journey? Reflections on the impact of research on researcher and participant”, *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 1 No. 3, pp. 204-21.
- Hertz, R. (1997), “Introduction: reflexivity and voice”, in Hertz, R. (Ed.), *Introduction: Reflexivity and Voice*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Holloway, I. and Wheeler, S. (1996), *Qualitative Research for Nurses*, Blackwell Science, Oxford.
- Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2000), *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Association, Narrative and the Interview Method*, Sage, London.
- King, E. (1996), “The use of self in qualitative research”, in Richardson, J. (Ed.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences*, British Psychological Society, Leicester, pp. 175-88.
- Letherby, G. (2003), *Feminist Research in Theory and Practice*, Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Mason, J. (2002), *Qualitative Researching*, Sage, London.

- Maynard, M. and Purvis, J. (1994), *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, Taylor and Francis, London.
- Oakley, A. (1981), *From Here to Maternity: Becoming a Mother*, Penguin (Pelican Books), London.
- Pullinger, J. and Summerfield, C. (1998), *Social Focus on Women and Men*, The Stationery Office, London.
- Ramazangolu, C. and Holland, J. (2002), *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices*, Sage, London.
- Reinharz, S. (1992), *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Ribbens, J. (1994), *Mothers and Their Children: A Feminist Sociology of Childrearing*, Sage, London.
- Rubin, H. and Rubin, I. (1995), *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Silverman, D. (2000), *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*, Sage, London.
- Skeggs, B. (1995), *Feminist Cultural Theory: Production and Process*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- Smart, C. and Neale, B. (1999), *Family Fragments?*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Stanley, L. and Wise, S. (1993), *Breaking Out Again: Feminist Ontology and Epistemology*, Routledge, London.
- Thair, T. and Risdon, A. (1999), "Women in the labour market, results from the Spring 1998 Labour Force Survey", *Labour Market Trends*, Vol. 107, Office for National Statistics, London, pp. 103-28.
- Valentine, G. (1999), "Doing household research: interviewing couples together and apart", *Area*, Vol. 31 No. 1, pp. 67-74.

About the author

Caroline Gatrell's research focuses on the embodiment of women's labour by relating to management practices questions around the sociologies of pregnancy, birth and motherhood. Through the concept of "the maternal body", She seeks to understand – in terms of women's reproductive and productive labour – the social pressures experienced by employed mothers of very young children. She also writes more generally on work practices and parenting, with a focus on the social and gendered constraints faced by professionally employed mothers and fathers. Her latest book is entitled *Embodying Women's Work* and is published by Open University Press. Caroline Gatrell can be contacted at: c.gatrell@lancaster.ac.uk